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ABSTRACT

Stay-in-School is a Canadian government initiative launched in the early 1990's encouraging young Canadians to build a solid foundation for the future by finishing high school and by acquiring the skills needed for the labor force of tomorrow. Three fundamental principles guided the initiative: (1) compassion, caring, and commitment are essential to change; (2) change is possible and likely when there is significant "buy-in" by participants; and (3) collective action can be expressed through the interdependency of many partners. The initiative used a strategy to reduce Canada's dropout rate through collective responsibility and action, and through the empowerment of every person. The strategy consisted of three components: (1) creating public awareness of the problem of dropouts; (2) mobilizing people by encouraging them to develop and share ideas, approaches, and solutions; and (3) providing moral and financial resources for implementing local interventions. Effects of the Stay-in-School initiative include a noticeable increase in student retention, improved academic achievement and life skills of participants, and increased public awareness of the dropout issue. Several recommendations are made regarding other large-scale student retention activities.

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An ERIC Digest

by Helen Hackett and Dan Baran

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Canadian Action on Early School Leaving: A Description of the National Stay-in-School Initiative

Helen Hackett and Dan Baran

Overview

Stay-in-School is a Canadian government initiative launched in the early 1990's encouraging young Canadians to build a solid foundation for the future by finishing high school and by acquiring the skills needed for the labor force of tomorrow. The Stay-in-School initiative issued a call to action. Canadians responded to the call with compassion, vigor and dedication; the initiative became a catalyst for caring. Through their actions, Canadians became catalysts for change.

The Challenges

Changing world circumstances of the late 1980's posed challenges for Canada's most precious natural resource—its people. Organizational restructuring, financial constraints, and increasing skills requirements and recurrent retraining powered a search for new approaches to prepare youth to enter the labor market and to assume adult roles in the workplace, family, community, and country. Canada recognized that the challenges to its strength and integrity required imaginative and vigorous responses.

Canada adopted two important assumptions: that youth are an essential component of its moral, social and economic fiber, and that graduation from secondary school forms the foundation for prosperity. The linkage of educational attainment to economic stability was clearly delineated in a Conference Board of Canada study entitled *Dropping Out: The Cost to Canada* (Lafleur, 1992). Accordingly, Canada worked to develop a response that addressed the needs of young Canadians, particularly those of the 30% of Canadian youth who do not complete secondary school. The Stay-in-School initiative grew out of these premises and challenges.

The Philosophy

Stay-in-School became anchored by the conviction that individuals, groups, and communities are inherently ingenious and resourceful, and are endowed with the capacity to solve problems through robust and inventive action. Three fundamental principles guided the Stay-in-School initiative:

1. Compassion, caring, and commitment are essential to change.

2. Change is possible and likely when there is significant "buy-in" by participants.

3. Collective action can be expressed through the interdependency of many partners.

The Strategy

The Stay-in-School initiative sought a strategy to reduce Canada's dropout rate through collective responsibility and action, and through the empowerment of every person, rather than using victimization and the attachment of blame. The Canadian government strategy that emerged was a process consisting of three components:

1. Give Canadians information about early school dropouts and create an awareness of this problem.

2. When Canadians have become aware of the situation, mobilize people by encouraging them to develop and share ideas, approaches, and solutions.

3. After Canadians generate intervention strategies tailored to their circumstances and which are supported locally, provide moral and financial resources for implementing these interventions.

Officials used three components to describe the strategy:

1. Public Awareness
2. Mobilization of Stakeholders
3. Programs and Services

Assessment

Taking Stock: An Assessment of the National Stay-in-School Initiative (Renihan et al., 1994) documents a formal evaluation conducted of the Stay-in-School initiative. Evaluators included measurements of multidimensional impacts stratified by group and geography. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected and a triangulation approach ensured reliability and validity of findings. Researchers surveyed over 3000 participating groups and individuals, and then interviewed over 200 respondents, including teachers, administrators, and ex-

ecutive officers of provincial and national stakeholder organizations.

Impact of the Stay-in-School Initiative

The assessment discovered a powerful consensus about the importance of the national Stay-in-School initiative. Key findings include the following:

- Most Canadian communities became involved in a strategic approach to counter early school leaving.

- The Stay-in-School initiative produced a noticeable increase in student retention.

- In-school coordinators of Stay-in-School projects reported that 84% of students involved in dropout interventions in 1992-93 completed their year. Of those students, less than 25% would have finished the scholastic year if a Stay-in-School intervention had not been in place.

- Fifty percent of school contacts noted enhanced academic performance in over half of the Stay-in-School participants. Improved life skills were reported by 70% of respondents.

- The public awareness campaign was universally seen to have had a dramatic and positive impact by raising awareness of the dropout issue.

- Almost all contacts stated that the Stay-in-School initiative was extremely cost-effective.

- Students reported improvement in self-confidence, work habits, life skills, and academic skills, and expressed a desire to continue with and succeed in school.

Analysis of Impact

The assessment concluded that the impact of the Stay-in-School initiative was manifested in four domains:

1. **Expansion of knowledge**

As a result of the Stay-in-School initiative, significant gains were made in public awareness and knowledge of the dropout issue. The public awareness campaign succeeded in alerting young Canadians and their parents to the serious consequences of leaving school early. Furthermore, the expanded knowledge includes an expectation that the dropout rate will be significantly reduced over time, and that programs and services will be generated to achieve this aspiration.

2. **Expansion of action**

A wide variety of programs for at-risk youth have been developed as a result of the Stay-in-School initiative. A theme pervading the qualitative data was that the success of student retention programs was largely dependent upon the creation of community ownership, and that this ownership could only be achieved through the deliberate structuring of solid educational partnerships. Alliances of individuals and organizations at the municipal, provincial, territorial, and national levels have produced numerous school retention tools and resources.

3. **Expansion of collaboration**

Collaboration of different levels of the administrative and government hierarchies has improved considerably as a result of Stay-in-School. This collaboration has provided the administrative infrastructures needed to maintain many student retention projects. Throughout the data collection, respondents repeatedly claimed that no other program in education has achieved such levels of inter-organizational collaboration. A variety of community service organizations, businesses, schools, and many other non-traditional groups developed.

4. **Expansion of moral obligation and responsibility**

The Stay-in-School initiative has brought about a significant number of changes in educational practice. Many jurisdictions are taking steps to formalize both program criteria and student tracking mechanisms. Many more are focusing on graduation and retention rates and establishing standards for follow-up. The progress of the Stay-in-School initiative has revealed imperfections in existing programs and has shown the need for an authentic and moral response to address the needs of at-risk youth. Adults in successful Stay-in-School programs willingly and consciously accepted a moral obligation for the education of at-risk students.

Assessment Recommendations

- Establish a Foundation for Student Retention. The Foundation would direct and initiate activities related to student retention, the dissemination of research findings, details of innovative practices, and other relevant information.

- Reaffirm the important role of parents in student retention initiatives.

- Redirect the public awareness campaign to profile the need for increased involvement of parents, business and labor groups to promote life-long learning, and to establish a local as well as a national focus on public awareness and information.

- Encourage and strengthen inter-agency collaboration.

- Direct the focus of disseminated research toward best practices in addition to prevention theory.

- The Canadian government should maintain a strong voice as an advocate for, and communicator of, student retention and school-to-work programs across the nation.

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